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SUBJECT: VOLGOGRAD MAYOR: YOUNG, PRAGMATIC... AND COMMUNIST (FOR NOW)

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Sensitive but unclassified.

Summary

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¶1. (SBU) The 31 year-old mayor of Volgograd, an unexpected winner in a special election held last May after his predecessor had been imprisoned on corruption charges, downplayed to us his Communist party affiliation. The mayor instead stressed his commitment to fostering a pro-business climate and working with the range of political parties. Despite the mayor's win in May and the Communist (KPRF) party's historical strength in Volgograd, observers expect United Russia easily to win a plurality in the region in the December Duma election. Some grouse at United Russia's use of institutional advantages, especially TV, which a Communist activist told us would make the December elections "a farce." Others believe a resounding win by United Russia in December could entice the mayor to think about shifting parties. End Summary.

An Unexpected Communist Win

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¶2. (SBU) Roman Grebennikov made headlines May 20 when he unexpectedly defeated the favored candidate from the pro-Kremlin United Russia party to become mayor. Grebennikov received 32.5 percent of the vote -- ten points ahead of his rivals from United Russia and A Just Russia. However, in a recent meeting with us in Volgograd, Grebennikov downplayed his Communist party affiliation. He attributed his victory to the personal record he established as Speaker of the regional Duma -- a record which stressed honest government and social justice. This had special resonance, he said, after his predecessor, Yevgeniy Ishchenko, was arrested in 2006 on corruption charges and removed from office.

¶3. (SBU) Grebennikov's United Russia party opponent came in third (behind the A Just Russia candidate). United Russia leaders in the region were quick to state, however, that they had no problem working with Grebennikov. Grebennikov stressed to us his interest in fostering a pro-business climate in Volgograd and in reaching out to cooperate with all political parties. He noted that the day before our meeting, he had appeared on TV with local business leaders to underline his pro-business message. Grebennikov said that his commitment to social programs required a healthy economy to generate revenue.

United Russia in the Lead

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¶4. (SBU) United Russia leaders in Volgograd told us they expected

to receive 40 percent of the region's vote in the December Duma election. Stressing their links to Putin, they underlined that United Russia had positioned itself as the party that can deliver. They also stressed outreach to younger voters. United Russia leaders told us that they were personally active in working with and training both the Young Guards and Nashi youth movements. United Russia leaders had no negative words for the mayor. Rather, they said that they did not see any fundamental differences between his program and that of United Russia. United Russia leaders and the mayor were the only ones with whom we spoke in Volgograd who stressed the importance of the business climate and the need to nurture small and medium enterprises.

#### A Just Russia

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15. (SBU) A Just Russia (SR) leaders told us they expect 25 percent of the vote in the December Duma election. This was well beyond the estimates for SR we heard from other political experts in Volgograd. SR leaders also stressed to us their connection to the Putin legacy, emphasizing Putin's ties to SR national leader Mironov. They also stressed the party's commitment to a significant expansion of social services. While endorsing the Kremlin's national projects in health, education, housing and agriculture, SR leaders differentiated themselves from United Russia by advocating using Russia's large financial reserves now to significantly pump up the level of social spending. They criticized Finance Minister Kudrin for being a fiscal tightwad, and called for his ouster.

#### Communist Party

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16. (SBU) Volgograd has been called the buckle of Russia's Red Belt. The Communist Party continues to draw on a large store of legitimacy dating from the USSR's victory at Stalingrad. Party leaders stressed to us that what distinguishes the KPRF most from other parties is its organizational depth. They regard the KPRF as the only real national political party in Russia. United Russia, by

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contrast, is the party of the officialdom and opportunists, they contended.

17. (SBU) Communist activists did not echo the mayor's enthusiasm for fostering an attractive business climate (in fact, they hardly mentioned the mayor at all). They stressed instead the need for ever greater level of social benefits, and lamented the collapse of the USSR's social safety net. They criticized oligarchs, past and present, and condemned United Russia's use of administrative resources, particularly TV. Communist activists told us they expected the KPRF to get about 20-25 percent of the vote in Volgograd in December. One regional leader said the party could get 40 percent if it had equal access to the media. Absent that, KPRF leaders agreed that United Russia would likely get 40 percent of the vote. KPRF activists dismissed the challenge posed to it from A Just Russia, saying that SR had yet to demonstrate organizational skills.

#### LDPR

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18. (SBU) The Volgograd region LDPR leader was alone in predicting that Zhirinovskiy's LDPR had a shot at second place in the region in December. He underlined that LDPR's appeal in Volgograd is populist, emphasizing the need for more social spending for pensioners and veterans. LDPR is the only party in Volgograd that stresses foreign policy. The regional leader told us that a major applause line for the party is the need for Russia to stand up for itself in the world. He said this was directed more at places like Georgia than the U.S.

#### Other Activities

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19. (SBU) We also met with two dozen exchange alumni and, separately, with NGO representatives. Regarding the political climate, most of

them said that the Volgograd voters would remain complacent as long as economic conditions continue to improve. All expected Putin and the Kremlin to successfully orchestrate the Duma and Presidential elections to assure continuity. While concerned about centralizing trends under Putin, most were optimistic that the political system would open up again in the medium term.

#### Mayor's Future

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¶10. (SBU) The Director of the Institute for Economic and Social research in Volgograd commented to us that if the mayor wants to advance politically, he will likely have to leave the Communist Party and join United Russia. Volgograd region Governor Maksiota has been in power since 1996, the Director noted, and has "correct but not close" relations with the Kremlin. If Grebennikov continues to stress pragmatism and reaches out to United Russia, he might be in line to replace Maksiota as governor in a few years.

#### Comment

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¶11. (SBU) Despite the controls of managed democracy, Grebennikov's election demonstrates that there can still be unexpected results. However, given his pragmatism and ambition, Grebennikov poses no threat to the powers that be.

RUSSELL